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Book Reviews

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CAHAN, SUSAN E. *Mounting Frustration: The Art Museum in the Age of Black Power*. Duke University Press, 2016, 360 pp., 20 color + 93 b&w illus., $34.95 cloth.

HEIN, HILDE. *Museums and Public Art: A Feminist Vision*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Book Store, 2014, 250 pp., $17.95 paper.

Within the history of the American Society for Aesthetics, there continues to be significant resistance to including the sociohistorical context of a work of art as part of the essential discussion of its aesthetic. Since the eighteenth century, aestheticians have often relied upon the judgments and consensus of (white) "men of taste" who set the norms for the elusive characteristic of "quality" in art, supposedly derived from a disinterested perspective that is objective, neutral, and imbued with an overriding concern for "pure" aesthetic value. Art historians, critics, and philosophers have set the standards for art that are considered high, fine and valuable, not to mention beautiful, canonical, and worthwhile as a monetary investment. These two books challenge museums—the predominant and continually evolving institutions of art delivery—in order to uncover and expose the rampant political biases and hidden strategies that their founders, administrators, and boards of trustees have utilized in order to maintain the preferred status quo of predominantly white male power. We learn that in spite of artists' activism and political actions to the contrary, executive decisions for the past fifty years—about exhibitions, the acquisition of new artworks, the creation of permanent collections—have often fueled self-serving interests of the powerful and elite whose money, influence, and capacity to determine the fate of an artist's career has typically run unchecked. (In full disclosure, I earned both undergraduate and graduate degrees in studio art and felt continually frustrated for decades in my attempts to "break into" the male-dominated artworld. I repeatedly tried to understand gallery trends and persistent museum discrimination against women, most recently codified in the data presented by Maura Reilly, "Taking the Measure of Sexism: Facts, Figures, and Fixes" [*ARTnews* 05/26/2015] that compares the notorious "report cards" issued by the Guerrilla Girls in 1986 and Pussy Galore in 2015.)

These two texts are noteworthy because they focus on reasons for a deliberate and systematic exclusion of under-represented artists from the establishment artworld. The stories are intricate and often intriguing, but mostly they are perplexing in their hypocrisy; museums publicly claim to serve "the public" but privately manipulate who counts—both as persons whose artistic production is considered worthy of value and exposure to "the public" as well as persons whose invitation to and consumption of art is carefully orchestrated by the kinds of shows curators choose to produce. The basic question aestheticians might ask is: What role is played by philosophical aesthetics within the scenarios of real-life decision making—particularly in the debates over "quality"? An additional question, though not yet asked by all in our profession, might be: How can a more enlightened vision of the future facilitate more parity for women and artists of color within persistently narrow and constrained artworld institutions?

The more recent and historical text, *Mounting Frustration*, is written by a highly experienced and knowledgeable member of the museum and academic world, Susan E. Cahan. She is an art historian and associate dean for the arts at Yale University with prior work as a curator and director of educational programs at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, the Museum of Modern Art, and the Peter Norton Family Foundation. In chronicling the recalcitrance of art museums in "the age of black power," she aims to persuade us that in spite of a number of noteworthy African American artists emerging after World War II in New York City, public efforts in the 1960s toward justice for growing numbers of Black artists to integrate museums amid the American civil rights movement and the good (though flawed) intentions of some isolated museum professionals to provide more parity for Black artists, full equality for artists of color within elite museums has failed. After decades of museums seeking to insulate themselves against operational change by mounting shows that included no artists of color while simultaneously denying there was any problem and rejecting proposed solutions by protesting activist artists, racial discrimination still persists through the preferred exhibition model for showcasing minority artists: the one-person "token" exhibition which Cahan considers an "'additive' approach to multicultural reform, which safely avoids radical revision" (p. 12). Historical evidence consists of case studies that are meticulously analyzed through internal museum documents and numerous interviews with artists, activists, and journalists. The historical context prior to 1967 included less than a dozen exhibits of African American artists (with perhaps the most prominent being Romare Bearden's 1966 show, *Art of the American Negro*) and numerous shows at major museums that routinely excluded Blacks. Although the Studio Museum in Harlem started up in 1968, serving as a positive model, major New York museums bungled attempts at integration, inspiring more protests. Prime examples of incompetency included the infamous 1969 *Harlem On My Mind* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the 1971 *Contemporary Black Artists* show at the Whitney Museum of Art, and the 1984 *"Primitivism" in 20th Century Art: Affinity of*

the Tribal and the Modern at the Museum of Modern Art. In these cases, Black artists were either systematically treated as invisible (*Harlem On My Mind* consisted of photographs of people with no actual works of art), as incapable of co-curating a survey of contemporary Black artists (resulting in twenty-four of the originally invited seventy-eight artists boycotting the show), or as sufficiently represented by only two Black artists in a show on primitivism that privileged modernism and abstract "art" over "tribal" artifacts of indigenous peoples. (Lest we think New York City is the only locus serving to influence audiences, the 1984 MoMA show circulated to twelve additional museums.)

Cahan cites this last case, where art was narrowly defined as "the creation of white European and European American artists" (p. 171), as the clearest example of a museum demonstrating "how aesthetic ideas were used to advance political agendas that could not be expressed outright .... [In effect] the Whitney Museum used aesthetic concepts to do the work of discrimination" (p. 8). Many other aesthetic issues were operative below the surface as well, for example, Black American artists who sought recognition were forced to confront the positing of "a black aesthetic": whether it was exemplified in their art and how it differed from that of "classical style" African art. Interestingly, theorist Alain Locke had written about such issues in the 1920s, arguing for the positive influence of African art upon Europeans and debating its importance with art historian James Porter who, conversely, encouraged Black artists not to imitate (as did Picasso and Brancusi) the "special geometric forms" of "primitive" originals (p. 189). (We can welcome the continuation of the discourse in Paul C. Taylor's *Black Is Beautiful: A Philosophy of Black Aesthetics* [Wiley Blackwell, 2016].) Another issue, as already noted in this review, was whether curating shows of exclusively black artists was a good strategy since they recused a museum from actually integrating temporary exhibits and permanent collections. Moreover, the ever-present "quality debate" raised questions about whether art created by Blacks rose to the standards of "high art" or even exhibited beauty. It is worth noting that many of the same aesthetic issues arose during the revolution of feminist art in the 1960s and 1970s. Female artists and theorists debated whether a unique feminist aesthetic was at work, whether alternative mediums like quilting constituted mere "craft" and not "(high) art," and whether all-women shows were/are conducive to long-term success. (The new Los Angeles gallery—Hauser Wirth & Schimmel—opened with an all-female show of thirty-four artists, *Revolution in the Making; Abstract Sculpture by Women, 1947–2016*, in March 2016). Women who experimented with their own bodies—for instance, in agentic performance art intended to subvert male-defined ideals of white female beauty—risked the dismissive snubs of artworld aficionados. (One art critic, Hilton Kramer, has been repeatedly cited by both feminist and race critics as a dominant voice that denounced artworks by both women and Blacks as lacking artistic quality.)

Hein's collection of essays includes several that were previously published (as far back as 1990) as well as revised versions of publicly delivered lectures. They cover topics such as "The Museum as Canon-maker," "Refashioning the Museum with Feminist Theory," and "Public Art: A New Museum Paradigm." As an esteemed, long-standing member of the American Society for Aesthetics and founding member of the ASA Feminist Caucus in 1990, Hein has been a mainstay within our profession: a role model with a groundbreaking feminist voice consistently strong and unyielding. Her skepticism that we live in a twenty-first century age of "post-feminism" in which women have triumphed over marginality and exclusion within a masculinist tradition recalls a mantra from the beginning of the women's movement: "As feminist scholars in the 1970s observed, 'add women and stir' is not a formula that suffices to resolve deeply rooted systemic problems" (p. 6). Calling herself a "museum theoretician," she observes museums and their personnel at the "meta" level, interested in how museums think and why: how the intentions that become policy are the product of both individual taste within the particular circumstances of an institution and local conventions. Her preferred mode of analysis is feminist; indeed she aims to bring feminist theory "down to earth" (p. 7) by applying probing questions to the real artworld dynamics of how museums operate. She does not claim that feminism provides all the answers or is the only conceptual framework to promote strategies for correcting unfairness; rather, her bias is toward feminism as "a preeminent change agent" (p. 7). Together with her previous writing—*The Exploratorium: The Museum as Laboratory* (Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990) and *The Museum in Transition: A Philosophical Perspective* (Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000)—she has observed a shift away from "object centered" to "experience centered" practice. A model for the type of activity toward which museums are now moving is previewed in her 2006 text *Public Art: Thinking the Museum Differently* (AltaMira Press). In the volume under review, she sees the two institutions of museums and public art sharing "a common dynamic of inclusiveness, experimentalism, open-endedness, and self-criticism" (p. 15). Her conclusion, however, is that in spite of new fields like Museum Studies, radically transformed disciplines of art history, cultural studies, queer studies, and others, plus many more women occupying positions within museums and

rising through the ranks, women "did not profoundly change the ethos of the institution" (p. 15). Many, in fact, saw no need to do so nor were they inclined to appeal to feminist theory as a guideline. Hein saw her work cut out for her—to more specifically suggest, as a feminist, what changes needed to be introduced and to provide a workable framework for their implementation. (Unfortunately, Hein has omitted any extensive discussion of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum of Art established in 2007 upon the occasion of the permanent installation of Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* as well as the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, D.C., incorporated in 1981.)

In comparing the two texts more fundamentally, I would conclude that Hein's text is more optimistic, in spite of Cahan having worked within the museum structure and Hein, as an academic, observing museums from the outside with the resolve to provide philosophically inspired answers to questions from museum administrators as to how to improve delivery of their product. Cahan is clearly the historian who offers us innumerable details in how museums have come to be as they are now; however, she ends on a pessimistic note in her epilogue: "This is not to say that nothing at all has changed, but that the theoretical frameworks of institutions has [sic] not changed. The reins of power have not been shared" (p. 266). She admits that the situation would be much worse were it not for three factors: (1) the continued presence of "culturally specific museums" like the Studio Museum in Harlem "that declare their points of view and the criteria they use to select and prioritize art" (p. 266); (2) a wave of new museums in the past twenty years—often with federal funding through the Smithsonian Institution—"with explicitly expansive missions" (p. 266) like the National Museum of the American Indian, the National Museum of African American History and Culture, and a planned National Museum of the American Latino; and (3) ongoing educational outreach—a proven means used by museums to attract minorities when they simultaneously refused to present actual exhibitions or integrate underrepresented artists. Cahan argues that continued resistance of individual institutions to internal change has resulted in "a restructuring of the museum system as a whole" whereby "whiteness as normative persists in the major museums, and even though it may be expressed in ways that are more subtle now than in the 1960s, the result is a similar kind of bigotry" (p. 266). Reading the text offers clues as to how administrators could have done things differently in individual situations; in addition, Cahan strongly promotes more dialogue, an open exchange of ideas, and cooperation among the parties involved. After all, she reminds us, the United States is undeniably moving toward a population where minority races outnumber whites.

Hein, on the other hand, is more optimistic, offering us a "feminist vision" that carefully chronicles minor changes at institutions but also presents a broader perspective on museums by standing apart from them and comparing them, as a system, to changes within the ongoing art practice of public art. Art outside the museum system, that is, truly "public" art, often involves ordinary people (not "experts") who participate nonhierarchically in a dynamic way: experimenting, locating art within communities, seeking out diverse audiences. Museums can follow this model toward a "radical reconception" that involves changes in language, presentation, education, and focus (p. 84). Less a static and passive repository of objects, museums can become more immaterial and ephemeral, geared toward perceiving "the value of objects to be instrumental, a means to the production of certain types of experience" (p. 230). Prime examples that Hein has already written about extensively include the Exploratorium in San Francisco (1969) and the Holocaust Memorial Museum (1984) in Washington, D.C.

It is interesting to note that art critics today continue to raise questions about museums, their holdings, and their funding sponsors. In "Making Museums Moral Again," Holland Cotter cited artists who protested the Louvre in 2015 while crucial policy negotiations were under way in Paris during the United Nations climate talks (*The New York Times*, March 17, 2016). Politically minded art collectives like Occupy Museums and Not an Alternative protested the museum's sponsorship ties to two of the world's largest oil companies. Similar protests against corporate connections have been directed at the Metropolitan, the Guggenheim, and major university museums (Harvard). Cotter notes that the new Louvre and Guggenheim franchises in Abu Dhabi have been criticized for "condoning, if not actively supporting, inhumane labor practices, like those imposed on migrant workers."

Meanwhile, there are some promising efforts toward diversity within the United States. The Speed Art Museum in Louisville, Kentucky, has worked to draw new audiences, broaden their scope of artists, and also diversify "at the top" by using "a board matrix" created by its director: a "long and detailed spreadsheet to recruit people for the museum's board of governors and board of trustees" that "assigns columns to race, age, gender and profession, and to less concrete categories like 'creative thinker'" (*The New York Times*, March 15, 2016). It has proven successful in undermining the "enduring homogeneity of museum boards," as evidenced in a 2007 study by the Urban Institute that found that 86% of board

members of American nonprofit institutions were non-Hispanic whites.

Less promising are the most recent statistics gathered by the Association of Art Museum Directors: in spite of gains made by women at small and midsize museums (often university or contemporary-art museums with budgets under $15 million), women run just 24% of the biggest art museums in the United States and Canada, and they earn 29% less than their male counterparts (see "Study Finds a Gender Gap at the Top Museums," *The New York Times*, March 7, 2014). Only five of the thirty-three most prominent art museums have women at the helm. It is hoped that organizations such as the Center for Curatorial Leadership and the Getty Leadership Institute will continue to help professionally train and move women and minorities into directorships; it almost goes without saying that very few persons of color successfully occupy these positions.

Clearly aestheticians can engage more directly in the ways our philosophical discourse plays a role in insuring more justice in everyday artworld practices. As Hein suggested, we can bring theory down to earth. I highly recommend these two texts as fonts of knowledge about the backroom workings of an artworld that we treasure. Individually, we can facilitate change by being more aware of implicit bias: every time we cite art examples in a published paper that excludes women and artists of color, whenever we teach a syllabus with no diversity in our choice of artists or any mention of institutional power structures, and when we inadvertently reinforce the norm that white, male, Eurocentric thinkers necessarily possess privileged credentials, experience, and intelligence to judge art. With self-awareness and continuing discussion, our own serious philosophical debates can give rise to a future in which the experience of art becomes more inclusive and meaningful.

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WARTENBERG, THOMAS E. *Mel Bochner: Illustrating Philosophy*. South Hadley, MA: Mount Holyoke College Art Museum, 2015, 48 pp., 30 color illus., $19.95 cloth.

The text under consideration is a catalogue for an exhibition held at Mount Holyoke College Art Museum, also entitled "Illustrating Philosophy." It includes a two-page foreword from the director, and twenty pages of essay and discussion by Thomas Wartenberg as well as seventeen page-sized illustrations. (The essay also contains a number of images, almost all of works by Bochner.)

Readers of this journal may know of Bochner's illustrations of Wittgenstein through the "Introduction" Arthur Danto contributed to a 1991 edition of *On Certainty*, reprinted in Danto's *Philosophizing Art* (University of California Press, 1999), an edition illustrated with twelve images from Bochner, the title page and two other front pages of which appear here as plates on pages 30–32. In explanation of the catalogue, Wartenberg recounts his decision to devote a session in a 2012 seminar on the philosophy of illustration to Bochner's pieces, based around this illustrated version of *On Certainty*; and Wartenberg's prefatory note (p. 9) expresses the hope "that this catalogue will bring more attention to the artworks featured in this exhibition," since, according to him, "they are a unique effort to bridge the gap between visual art and philosophical ideas."

Philosophical commentary might intersect with some artworks in a fairly straightforward way, once one moves beyond art criticism and the like. A philosophical work that appears composed of slogans might have some of those slogans illustrated; for me, some works by Nietzsche might seem good candidates. And, of course, *On Certainty* is often read in this way—not as an argument, but as a set of claims, or assertions, or slogans. But such illustration of slogans is appropriate only to works of that sort precisely because the *argument* of any philosophical work, being discursive, cannot lend itself to a graphic depiction not strictly translatable into words. (Wartenberg expresses himself surprised [p. 8] that there were very few illustrated versions of philosophical texts, citing only the title page to Hobbes's *Leviathan* [a vast, complex allegory].) I suggest this is the reason (and my case is realized in the "argument by signs" in Rabelais's *Gargantua and Pantagruel* [Book Two, Chapter XVIII]): either the "argument" is translatable into a linguistic argument (as it would be if the gestures were in American Sign Language), or it is very unclear how it can constitute an *argument*.

What would be required, of course, are illustrations "true to the ideas" of the philosophical text, and, while I do not assume such ideas necessarily form a unity, the need to offer a single illustration, or set of them, must raise the question, "has the illustrator 'got it right' as to the philosophy in the text illustrated?" For clearly something illuminating *of the philosophy* must be offered.

Obviously a full appreciation of a text like this requires acquaintance with the artworks. As that cannot readily be provided here, I shall concentrate on some key issues for the illustration of philosophy by art, or the integration of philosophy into art—themes raised in Wartenberg's illuminating essay. For, having admitted that he "initially found

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